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ABSTRACT

The practice in Swedish universities of requiring an independent project and term paper of third-term English language students has been very difficult for many students. The problems have been more related to students' lack of organizational skills than to problems with writing in a foreign language. As a result, Lund University and later Uppsala University developed English speech and writing programs to help students structure both their research and their accounts of it. In one program, students are offered a variety of topics to research, and in the other, all students address one topic. The slightly different focus of the two programs produced different pedagogical approaches, each with advantages and disadvantages, but both programs have been successful in improving student writing skills. (MSE)

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WILL THERE BE TEXTS IN THIS CLASS?
WRITING TERM PAPERS WITHIN A RESEARCH PROJECT

1. INTRODUCTION

A frequent complaint from teachers all over the world, at all levels of education, is that their students cannot write. Even when they have mastered syntax and spelling, they often have great difficulty in organizing their written production into coherent texts (cf Wikborg, in press). The problem seems to be particularly acute in Swedish universities, regardless of discipline, for several reasons, a couple of which may be mentioned here: the relative lack of writing practice at school level, and the lack of time and a coherent programme for creative writing at university level. A major project designed to chart and, if possible, remedy writing problems has been started at Stockholm University, in part inspired by The Bay Area Writing Project in the United States. See Björk (in press) and Wikborg (in press).

Our purpose here is to discuss writing problems at one particular level and in one specific field, viz the third term of the undergraduate course of English at Swedish universities, and to report on how working within a research project has helped us to come to terms with at least some of these problems. Our attention will focus on students specializing in English linguistics as distinct from English literary studies.

In Swedish universities, most undergraduates spend only two terms in any modern language department (a deplorable consequence of the fact that secondary school teachers are required to teach more than two subjects, and that the time of study required for a bachelor's degree is limited to three years). However, a small number of students do go on to do a third term involving a certain amount of specialization (and a subset of those students later do a fourth term as a possible transition to graduate study). The third-term students are required to produce an essay, or term paper, on

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a scholarly topic, corresponding to about four or five weeks' independent work. This part of the third term curriculum causes many of them great difficulties.

These difficulties should be seen against the background that in Swedish departments of English, the first two terms are to a large extent devoted to the pursuit of proficiency. English grammar is taught from a contrastive point of view, and the terminology is in Swedish. There are grammar exercises, translation practice, and, to a very limited extent, exercises in composition. In the third term, the students are suddenly required to produce a piece of scholarly writing in English, consisting of about 15 pages, on a literary or linguistic subject. For the purpose of training scholarly abilities such as using libraries, consulting bibliographies, making correct references and quotations, and methodology in general, as well as for discussions of finished papers, students are gathered in undergraduate seminars meeting seven or eight times in one term. In principle, the paper is to be finished before the end of the third term. In practice, this has rarely been the case. Many students give up altogether, which means that they get no academic credit at all for the term's work. Another large group of students take much longer than one term to finish their papers, which means that they may have to start with one instructor and finish with another, and that they will submit their papers for discussion in a new seminar group consisting of completely unknown students, something most of them find difficult and embarrassing.

The reasons for the failure rate are not difficult to find. Within the brief span of one term, students are expected to find a reasonable topic, master new English terminology, do a piece of non-trivial research, and write it up in a variety of English they have previously been unfamiliar with. This is an awe-inspiring task, even if their selection of a topic is facilitated by their instructor. In fact, it is more remarkable that some students actually succeed in producing term papers within the allotted time than that so many of them fail.

It is important to emphasize that the problem experienced by most students as the most difficult one is not that they have to express themselves in a foreign language. Moreover, although grammatical terminology is difficult, it can be taught and mastered. What students seem to find most difficult is structuring, first, their research, and second, their accounts of it. Many of them also suffer from isolation in their work, writing as they are on widely disparate topics and experiencing for the first

time the 'solitary confinement' necessary for the actual writing process. In short, they share the problems of all writers in any given field - but they have too little time to learn to cope with them on their own.

When we started the project English in Speech and Writing (abbreviated ETOS for Engelska i tal och skrift)[1] at the University of Lund in 1981, we decided that the project should have a twofold aim. Our main concern would be the scholarly task of ascertaining differences between spoken conversational English and written informative English, on the basis of research on two computerized standard corpora of British English, viz the London-Lund Corpus of Spoken English (LLC), and the Lancaster-Oslo/Bergen Corpus (LOB), or on subsets of those corpora. We also decided that the project should have a strong pedagogical bias: we would strive to involve students at different levels, starting with the third-term undergraduates and hoping that some would continue at the fourth-term or graduate levels. Our motives were partly selfishly practical, partly altruistic. We realized the work force potential of the undergraduates - they would be able to help with much of the drudgery involved in corpus work - but we also had the possible benefits to our undergraduates very much in mind. We hoped that if a whole seminar group concentrated on the same or related tasks within the framework of a specific research project, this would enable the teacher to help all students to structure their research and writing, and it would also provide a support group with common interests among fellow students (see further Tottie et al 1983). These ideas were not new or original - eg Alvar Ellegård based much of his work The syntactic structure of English texts (1978) on student participation - but it seemed to us that they had not been sufficiently practised.

The first practical step that was taken was to compose a project manual (Tottie et al 1983), designed for individual student use and intended to give a general introduction to the ETOS project, its background, aims and material. Apart from a brief account of previous and current research on spoken and written English, and a select annotated bibliography (by Anna-Brita Stenström), the manual contains a detailed description of the project corpora (and the American Brown Corpus), including an indispensable

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1. The project is funded by the Swedish Council for Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences.

illustrated survey of the many versions and adaptations of these corpora that are available for research (running texts, concordances and frequency lists, in printed or printout form, on computer tape or microfiche). It also contains a detailed account of the texts and genre categories in the various corpora, including the special subsets selected for the ETOS project and designated as the Mini and Midi corpora.

In what follows, we wish to report on nearly two years' experience of conducting undergraduate seminars within the framework of the ETOS project. Since the transfer of Gunnel Tottie to the Department of English at Uppsala University in 1982, the project has been extended to include the undergraduate seminar in English linguistics at that university. For practical reasons, work has been conducted along very different lines at Lund and Uppsala. At Lund, students have been offered a wide selection of topics each term, whereas at Uppsala, work has concentrated on one specific area of grammar. We therefore propose to give separate accounts of our work at Lund and Uppsala. Our reports will differ in focus, concentrating on research topics and pedagogical method, respectively. Finally, we will present a joint conclusion, discussing the relative merits of our different approaches.

2. LUND

The general lack of writing practice and linguistic schooling among Swedish university students of English is typically illustrated by the situation at Lund University. When the students begin their third term, they have attended brief courses in composition as part of their language proficiency programme, but they have no experience of independent scholarly work and how to report their findings in a term paper. Their knowledge of English grammar and linguistics is limited to the presentation given in contrastive handbooks (eg Svartvik & Sager 1977) or general introductions (eg Greenberg 1977). Hence, they can be said to be handicapped in three vital areas: English composition, research and linguistics.

In order to compensate for these deficiencies, the English department at Lund now offers a short preparatory course in English linguistics at the beginning of the third term. The course is adjusted to the goals of the ETOS project and offers a grounding in English stylistics (based on Crystal & Davy 1969 and 1975, and Leech & Svartvik 1975), with a strong emphasis on practical analysis of spoken and written English texts. At the

end of the course the students make an independent study of some aspect of English style and summarize their results in a short paper (5-10 pages). The students are given intensive counselling on how to organize their papers, and the finished papers are provided with detailed comments by the instructor and finally discussed in class or in individual sessions with the students. This introductory course has proved to be a success: students often express their appreciation of the individual attention given to them, and many in fact develop their course papers into full-length term papers.

Concurrently with the introductory linguistics course, the students begin to attend group seminars introducing them to basic research methods, composition techniques, and to the ETOS project. The spoken and written material is presented, background articles of general interest are studied (eg Chafe 1982, Akinnaso 1982), and possible research areas are discussed. Having chosen their topics (which are further defined in private tutorials) the students are set free to work on their research tasks, individually or in groups. During the remainder of the term the seminars serve as a forum for discussing common problems, interim reports and, finally, the finished papers.

The remainder of this section will be devoted to a brief account of the special research 'profile' at Lund and some of the problems connected with this. To accommodate a fairly large number of participants (10-15 per term), the undergraduate programme at Lund was given a fairly wide scope from the start, permitting a comparatively broad selection of research topics. Hence, rather than concentrating on a single theme (as at Uppsala), a set of research areas were defined, partly along the lines suggested for Swedish by Teleman (1974:9-16). Each area was divided into a number of topics that were judged suitable for study by inexperienced students with limited time at their disposal. Since the autumn of 1982 work has been going on in the following areas (for a full list of topics and other details, se the Appendix):

1 Vocabulary
2 Linkage
3 Interaction and involvement
4 Focus and thematic structure
5 Grammatical structure and complexity
6 Language and sex

The reasons for focusing on these research areas have been both practical and theoretical. Most of them concern central aspects of English that the students are likely to be familiar with from their language training classes and therefore require little extra schooling to understand. All of them involve variable linguistic properties that can be expected to reveal interesting differences in spoken and written discourse, even in small-scale investigations based on a limited material. Some of them have attracted comparatively little attention in previous empirical studies; others have been more extensively treated, but with little regard to patterns of distribution in speech and writing - and even when this has been the case, the findings have often been based on different or inadequate material and therefore deserve to be tested on the basis of the 'prototypical' varieties included in the ETOS corpora. Some areas, finally, have been previously studied on comparable Swedish material (eg Einarsson 1976, 1978) and therefore offer good opportunities for cross-linguistic comparison. Such comparisons are of interest, not only because they may throw some light on the generality of stylistic differences, but also because they are interesting and useful to Swedish learners of English.

All these areas have not been offered for study all the time. The emphasis has generally been on two or three areas each term, and has shifted gradually as some ground has been covered and a new generation of students has had to be provided with fresh topics. Hence, the list above should be seen as the past and current stages in a slowly evolving research programme that is subject to constant adjustment in the light of experience and new ideas. The area 'Language and sex', for example, was not part of the original programme, but was added at the suggestion of two female undergraduates as an alternative option for students with a strong personal interest in the social roles of men and women and the way these affect linguistic behaviour. It may be dismissed as a marginal and trendy subject, but has in fact proved to be a fruitful one, not only because of the general information it provides about various communicatively important phenomena (such as pausing, turn-taking, the use of tag-questions, softeners, nuclear tones, etc) and the different constraints - whether grammatical, social, sexual or individual - that regulate the use of these. Sex-differentiated language has been investigated fairly extensively in recent years, in English as well as Swedish, and the conversational texts of the ETOS corpus (where the sex of the speakers is indi-

cated) are in many ways well suited for comparative studies in this respect (see Altenberg, this volume).

Since the spring of 1982 more than twenty-five undergraduates - mainly third-term students - have been engaged on studies in these six research areas (cf the Appendix). The great majority of these have been completed in the time recommended (4-5 weeks' intensive work) and presented in the form of term papers discussed in group seminars. The quality of these papers has of course varied, with regard to style as well as content. Yet, the general effect of integrating regular undergraduate course work within the framework of a research project has been decidedly positive. The papers have on the whole been well written and well structured (the exceptions have been deficient in language rather than in composition technique), and most of them have treated their topics in a competent and resourceful way. Although the studies have necessarily been restricted in aim and scope, many of them have given valuable contributions to their research areas (for some of the results, see Altenberg, this volume). Studies of this kind are a good illustration of how undergraduate research can serve to increase our knowledge of linguistic phenomena.

3. UPPSALA

At Uppsala, the undergraduate seminar during the autumn of 1982 focused on adverbials in speech and writing. The scholarly results are described in Tottie (this volume).

The Uppsala students' background was similar to that of the Lund undergraduates: they had studied Svartvik & Sager (1978) and were thus to some extent familiar with the grammatical system of Quirk et al (1972), if not with English terminology. At the beginning of the autumn a course on grammatical theory and English linguistics was offered, based on Langacker (1973) and Quirk & Greenbaum (1973). Selections from both were studied, and students were thus initiated to linguistic problems and English grammatical terminology. This course, one of the standard requirements of the Uppsala English department, differed in many respects from the introductory linguistics course at Lund described in the preceding section: it was more theoretical, it was taken by many students not planning to do work in English linguistics, and the final test was a conventional paper consisting of questions to be answered within four hours, which means that it could not serve as writing practice.

Parallel to this course, the project seminars started, drawing six serious students. The students were told that we would meet more often than the stipulated eight times: every week at the beginning of term, and as often as required later on. A brief presentation of the ETOS project was given, and the ETOS manual (Tottie et al 1983) was distributed. There was also a short introduction to the study of adverbials and, in particular, to the semantic and structural properties that we were to investigate. However, the most pressing concern seemed to be to impart a better understanding of spoken language to the students. We therefore listened to some of the taped conversations accompanying Crystal & Davy (1975). The students were asked to try to characterize the properties of these conversations, and they obviously remarked on such features as repetitions, interruptions, speaker overlaps, etc. They were then asked to transcribe a short portion of text without looking at the book, a task which, not unexpectedly, they found extremely difficult and time-consuming, and which brought home to them the enormous differences between conversational and written language. Parts of Crystal & Davy (1975) were assigned as homework and discussed.

The second task was to focus on the description of adverbials. Chapter eight of Quirk & Greenbaum (1983) was assigned for close reading and comparison with the sections on adverbs and adverbials in Svartvik & Sager (1978:333-348, 365-375, and 426-441). The similarities and differences as well as the virtues and drawbacks of the two systems were discussed.

The third step was to familiarize students with the texts they were to analyze. Specimens of conversational and written English from our corpora (photocopies of pages from Svartvik & Quirk 1980 and computer printouts from LOB) were distributed. As homework, each student was asked to analyze the adverbials occurring in a few hundred words of each variety according to the model of analysis offered by Quirk & Greenbaum (1973), and to keep track of all problems arising in the coding and to bring them to class for discussion.

It turned out that the Quirk & Greenbaum classification of adjuncts (pp 210ff) was too complicated for our use, and we therefore opted for the simplified system described in Tottie (this volume). There were, of course, numerous problems of analysis, and after discussing them at seminars, the solutions adopted were listed on sheets of coding instructions. This went on for a few weeks, with updating of the instructions every week until

there was a five-page booklet that covered the most recurrent types of difficulties. If students had problems of analysis between seminars, they were encouraged to come to office hours twice a week for on-the-spot rescue.

After about six or seven weeks, the students felt confident enough to undertake independent analysis of larger chunks of material. Each of them was supposed to cover 5 000 words of spoken material and 5 000 words of written material. In actual fact, four of the six students decided to work in pairs, submitting joint papers covering twice the individual quota of material. To facilitate their work, they were given mimeographed worksheets based on experiences culled from their initial analytical work, where data could be entered in tabular form.

When the students had been working with the data for a couple of weeks, there was a meeting to decide on guidelines for the organization of papers. We paid particular attention to the construction of tables, as there would obviously be a fair amount of statistics, and it was necessary to ensure easy comparability of data from the different papers, and ultimately, conflation. We thus had to decide both what information was to be conveyed by tables and how it was to be distributed along different axes. We decided on a 'lowest common denominator' for all papers, but students were of course free to present additional material and analyses, which several of them also did (eg subcategorization of place adjuncts into those of source, direction, etc).

We also discussed general principles of organization of papers, such as the amount of background information to be included, types of linguistic exemplification to be supplied, etc. The students were then asked to write first drafts of their papers and to submit those to Gunnel Tottie for perusal and discussion. From now on, work was done individually or by students in pairs, and we had short but frequent discussions during office hours.

By Christmas time, all but one student had finished first drafts, and by January 15, revised versions. These were photocopied and distributed to the remaining members of the group. On January 26, about one week into the spring term, there was a final meeting with a discussion of the three papers that had by then been completed, two joint papers and one written by a student working on her own.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The hopes we had when we started the ETOS project concerning student co-operation, both as regards scholarly results and the production of term papers, have been fulfilled. More than ninety per cent of the undergraduates working within ETOS have produced papers of reasonable quality within the stipulated time. A concerted effort towards a shared goal, centering on a common topic area, has proved to be an efficient means to stimulate students to more efficient writing by providing a common frame of reference and a supportive peer group. (This experience is of course not unique: for instance, literary seminar groups in the Uppsala English department have proved much more successful in terms of output of essays when they have been organized as projects focusing on one particular research area, than when students have been working individually on widely disparate subjects.)

If project-oriented work thus seems generally beneficial, there are of course differences between the approaches described above that may merit some attention. The fact that the Uppsala adverbials project focused on a narrowly defined area offered many advantages: in addition to the above-mentioned ones of a shared frame of reference and peer-group support, it was possible to discuss the organization of papers in great detail in class, as well as aspects of scholarly writing. Moreover, the instructor was able to give a great deal of individual attention to each student, simply because the concentration to one research topic is much less taxing than advising on a variety of subjects simultaneously.

The potential disadvantages of a unified approach are obvious. Some students, perhaps especially the more gifted ones with strong research interests of their own, may feel that the tight organization of a project-oriented seminar prevents them either from pursuing their own interests or from structuring and presenting their research in the manner they find most appropriate. There were no complaints in the 1982 Uppsala group - in fact, reactions were overwhelmingly positive - but the risk is a real one and must not be minimized. It is essential that students who have viable research ideas of their own should be encouraged and helped to realize them. Offering project-oriented seminars every other term and 'general' seminars every other term, as is currently the case at Uppsala, may be at least a partial solution.

Students are obviously much freer to pursue their own interests if a more diversified approach is taken, as at the Lund English department. Those to whom concepts like 'syntax' and 'grammatical structure' are anathema have been given at least some chance of finding a topic that is closer to their hearts. Also, the flexibility of the programme has left some scope for individual proposals and initiatives. The area 'Language and sex', for example, was introduced at the suggestion of two female students, who embarked on their task with great enthusiasm and produced good papers on the subject (see Altenberg, this volume).

Some negative observations concerning the research programme at Lund should also be mentioned. The fairly generous policy adopted there, offering a comparatively wide selection of topics in several research areas, has inevitably had a certain 'scattering' effect on the research effort, and has tended to delay results in many research areas. On the whole, however, the experience of working within a common framework has had a wholesome and stimulating effect on both instructor and students.

What we have not been able to achieve within the limited scope of the ETOS project has been to provide a more general training in composition. This is a field which, as we remarked at the outset, is sadly neglected in the Swedish system of education. What one would wish for now is a systematic and integrated approach to the training of writing, starting during the first terms of undergraduate study. In English, it should involve not only the existing 'free writing' classes but should comprise course papers in such subjects as English literature and British and American 'realia'. Examination by means of course papers is standard practice in other countries, and our experience of the introductory English linguistics course at Lund has shown it to be extremely beneficial to students. It seems certain that such a pervasive programme would be useful to undergraduates and help them not only to produce reasonable term papers but to make them confident about writing in their future careers.

APPENDIX

Undergraduate studies on spoken (S) and written (W) English at Lund University (1982 - May 1983).

Vocabulary:

J Lundgren, Great, big and large (S/W, BE/AE)
H Nordin, Lexical density, variation and originality (S/W)
S Ohlsson, Word-class distribution (S/W)
E Ryberg, Word-formation (S/W)

Linkage:

B Bjursten, Contrastive and concessive connecters (S/W)
K Hallin, Coordination and ellipsis (S/W)
K Price, Causal connecters (S/W)

Interaction and involvement:

G Barkenius, Interaction signals (S)
A Bengtsson & M Bertilsson, Modal auxiliaries, mental verbs and subject types (S/W)
Z Fritzon, Dialogue in genuine conversation and literary drama (S/W)
B Merkel, Attitudinal and style disjuncts (S/W)
C Paradis, Hesitation (S)
E Thomasson, Expressions of vagueness (S/W)
B Ahman, Softeners (S)

Focus and thematic structure:

M Elnertz, Marked focus (S)
E Larsson, Marked word-order (S/W)
A Olsson, The passive (S/W)

Grammatical structure and complexity:

B Andersson, The structure of the noun phrase
U Hedling, Adverbials (S/W)
M Johansson, Non-finite clauses (S/W)
P Lindberg, Position and types of adverbial clauses (S/W)
U-B Nilsson, Sentence types and sentence structure (S/W)
J Sperski, The syntactic structure of tone units (S)

Language and sex:

E Klang, Sex-specific language in same-sex conversations (S)
C Rosmark, Sex-specific language in cross-sex conversations (S)

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